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ABSTRACT

In describing reading proficiency--the relative difficulty or ease that an individual reader experiences reading a particular text--researchers have recognized the importance of both text- and reader-based factors. This digest focuses on the factor of purpose, as determined by the reader or the instructional context. Having a purpose means having a reason to read and approaching a text with a particular goal in mind, whether that goal involves learning or entertainment. In both real-world and classroom situations, purpose affects the reader's motivation, interest, and manner of reading. The digest is organized under these headers: (1) pleasure reading in a foreign language; (2) the factor of interest; (3) reading purpose in the classroom and the concept of task; (4) textual analysis: working with meaning and form; (5) foreign language literacy and academic tasks; (6) pre-reading activities for the advanced level; (7) and uses of text across the curriculum. (Author/VWL)

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Reading with a Purpose: Communicative Reading Tasks for the Foreign Language Classroom

Elizabeth M. Knutson, U.S. Naval Academy

In describing reading proficiency—the relative difficulty or ease that an individual reader experiences in reading a particular text—researchers have recognized the importance of both text- and reader-based factors. This article focuses on the factor of purpose, as determined by the reader or the instructional context. Having a purpose means having a reason to read and approaching a text with a particular goal in mind, whether that goal involves learning or entertainment. In both real-world and classroom situations, purpose affects the reader's motivation, interest, and manner of reading.

Reading in the Real World

Reading in the real world is defined here as reading outside the classroom, or nonacademic reading. Real-world reading is performed for any number of reasons, and the nature of reading varies according to the reader's purpose and situation. These factors inevitably determine the reader's approach to the text—the amount of attention paid, the time spent, as well as what features or parts of the text are focused on.

Perhaps the broadest distinction commonly made in defining real-world reading purpose is that of reading for pleasure versus reading for information. Pleasure reading is most frequently associated with narrative, and in particular, popular fiction. It is commonly perceived to be the antithesis of academic or serious reading. By contrast, reading to learn is pursued to gain insight or information. Reading for information may range from the scanning of documents and the reading of letters to in-depth reading of articles or books. Whether we are reading for pleasure or information, the nature of the reading depends on what we want from the text, as well as situational factors such as time available or constraints relative to place of reading. No matter what our agenda, *why* and *where* we read inevitably determine *how* we read.

Pleasure Reading in a Foreign Language

In second language acquisition research and theory, Krashen has consistently argued that pleasure reading is an important source of comprehensible input for acquisition. The only requirement "is that the story or main idea be comprehensible and the topic be something the student is genuinely interested in, that he would read in his first language" (Krashen, 1982, p. 164). To encourage light reading in a foreign language, foreign language departments can provide a library or resource where students can browse and take out reading materials of interest. At the high school or college levels, it is possible to incorporate some free outside reading into course syllabi. Over the course of a semester, students can be asked to perform one self-selected reading and report on it in oral or written form. While the reporting task turns the activity into work, the important element of self-selection is still retained. Alternatively, students can work with magazines and newspapers in the classroom or library to create a portfolio of texts on a topic of interest. In the portfolio, students identify the source and briefly summarize the gist of each text. In addition, they write a paragraph explaining their interest in the topic, reactions to certain articles, and questions they may have. The instructor responds in writing with comments on both the topic itself and the text collection.

Because reading is valuable input for language acquisition, it makes sense to take advantage of the fact that many students in elementary courses are capable of reading far beyond the level at which they speak. Strong language learners and good readers can benefit from reading longer, narrative texts at earlier levels of instruction. Unfortunately, readings in elementary textbooks for commonly taught languages are generally limited to short, informational texts. Literary and cultural readings in intermediate textbooks are often only excerpts. As a supplement to introductory textbooks, instructors can assign universally known stories or tales, or longer authentic texts on topics with which students are already familiar. Intermediate-level students can read detective stories or other formulaic fiction.

The Factor of Interest

Wherever possible, instructors should ask students directly about their interests and provide them with choices of authentic texts. But reader interest in a text can also be a function of purpose. Educational researchers have defined several different categories of interest. Individual or personal interest refers to long-standing preferences on the part of a particular reader for certain topics or related subject matter (Schiefele, 1992). By contrast, situational interest refers to interest generated by situational factors, including the text itself. Text-based situational interest is generally defined as interest that is elicited by text through topics or ideas that are of universal or archetypal appeal (Hidi & Anderson, 1992). Another form of situational interest, and one that concerns us here, is reading purpose.

In a study that sought to determine the effect on interest and recall of reading with a particular perspective, Schraw and Dennison (1994) found that focusing readers' attention on selected text information increases what the researchers term purpose-driven interest and that text segments that are relevant to a readers' purpose are recalled better than those that are not. The implications of this study for classroom instruction are clear and significant. When readers are asked to read a text with a particular focus or angle, both their reading interest and retention of text material are heightened.

Reading Purpose in the Classroom and the Concept of Task

Because reading is more interesting and text information is understood and recalled better when reading is purpose driven, it follows that creating purpose in the classroom reading situation will enhance readers' interest and performance. But how narrowly should the concept of purpose be defined? In the broadest sense, even the most traditional textbook comprehension exercises provide students with the purpose of reading a text for specific information. Yet traditional comprehension questions generally address all information in the text in an undifferentiated manner. This kind of even, comprehensive coverage is well intentioned but unfortunately results in a leveling of content, as if all ideas or aspects of the text were equally important. In short, there is no reading perspective. Rarely in real-world reading do we pay equal attention to everything in a text, and exercises that lead students to approach a text in this way may well remove the important element of interest from the reading process. An alternative to comprehension questions that often accompany textbook dialogues or cultural texts is to have students write a list based on the text. Depending on content, this could be a list of places, events, or even facts the student finds interesting.

Reading with a purpose means approaching texts with a specific goal. When possible, students can be asked to read a text from a specific point of view, depending on what the text might suggest. In the classroom, students can be given reasons to read that approximate their purposes in a variety of real-world situations. They can read ads for apartments to find one that fits a particular set of requirements, look through movie listings and reviews to decide whether to see a particular movie, or respond to a written invitation.

Beyond these comprehension exercise types, purposeful reading can also be part of whole communicative tasks in the foreign language classroom. Nunan (1993) defines a communicative task as a "piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 59). Strictly speaking, in task activities, the goal is nonlinguistic. The idea is to get something done via the language, to read a text and do something with the information (Long & Crookes, 1992). Whole tasks involve performance of reading in conjunction with other skills: listening, speaking, or writing. For example, students in a small group might read a number of texts, such as brochures, timetables, or maps, and listen to radio weather or traffic reports in order to carry out the larger task of deciding on the best method of transportation to use on a trip. In such an activity, each student deals with one category of information, and all students must communicate their information to one another to come up with the best plan for the trip.

Still other kinds of communicative tasks may be activities that would not actually occur in real-world situations. For example, a classroom reading task might involve students drawing a picture based on a written text, reconstructing a text that has been cut up into paragraphs, or, in pairs, reading slightly different versions of the same story and discovering differences through speech alone. These tasks, while not real world, are still communicative; the focus is on understanding a text to get something done.

A task approach conveys to students the value of fluent and efficient

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reading, because reading for a specific purpose means reading texts in different ways at different speeds, depending on the information needed and the task to be carried out. Another advantage of tasks is that students can work with authentic texts from the start. A complex, unedited text can be made accessible by adjusting the level of difficulty of the task. The same text can be used at different points during a semester, each time with a different task or purpose. In rereading the same text with a different purpose, students derive a sense of accomplishment from their progressively greater comprehension and more extended use of the text.

Textual Analysis: Working with Meaning and Form

Recent reading research points to the benefits of working with texts for the purpose of drawing students' attention to formal features of written language as well (Long & Crookes, 1992). A communicative or task approach can and should be combined with analysis of text structure and linguistic features of text; however, most specialists concur that instructors should focus on textual messages first. If an individual student cannot perform a task successfully due to misreading of a text, the student will need to reread problematic segments and attend more closely to the text structure. If many students in a class experience difficulty with certain syntactical structures or forms of text organization, the instructor may choose to conduct a reading lesson that targets those areas.

Students can be led from considerations of content to those of form in a natural manner. In the domain of rhetoric, for example, students can be asked to identify the discourse features of the text that contribute to its persuasiveness. They can focus on pragmatic issues of register and audience and examine the lexical networks that connect text segments and the use of syntax to establish topic and theme. Textual analysis of this sort is a different kind of activity from reading to perform a communicative task. Both uses of text are beneficial, but it is necessary for instructors and students to distinguish between them. It is also important that a text be apprehended first in terms of meaning and reader response.

Foreign Language Literacy and Academic Tasks

In advanced-level courses, such as film studies or special topics in literature, the real-world uses of text are less evident; rather, the focus is on academic tasks. In most academic tasks, such as presenting a report or writing a paper, reading plays a significant role.

In discussions of the concept of critical literacy, reading and interpretation have been defined by a variety of researchers as being able to talk about a text, which in turn means being able to participate in a "conversation of readers" (Graff, 1992). In his view, literacy is both a social and cognitive process.

Importantly, Graff situates reading within the larger communicative context of academic discourse and emphasizes the primacy of context over text. He argues that reading a literary text in order to support or counter a particular critical argument can engage students who otherwise would not know what to think or say about what they are reading. Thus, in literature courses, an important sense of purpose can be created by asking students to read from a particular angle or with a particular argument in mind.

Literacy tasks for upper-level coursework should afford diverse opportunities for interaction among students: In a discussion of academic discourse and collaborative learning, Bruffee (1984) borrows the Vygotskian concept of thought as internalized conversation to argue for "engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points in both the writing and the reading process as possible"—in short, for pedagogical practice that acknowledges and reflects the social and inter-textual nature of literacy and knowledge. This means less emphasis on reading as a solitary activity and more on reading and talking with others.

Pre-reading Activities for the Advanced Level

A reader's background knowledge with respect to text topic and genre is recognized as a significant factor in text comprehension. As a result, textbooks and pedagogical practice now routinely include pre-reading activities with authentic texts or other reading selections. Interestingly, a benefit of such activities is the focus or purpose for reading that they can provide. The value of pre-reading work for both comprehension and interest does not diminish at the advanced level. In literature courses, for example, writing and discussion can serve equally well as an entry into a whole text or text segment. Pre-reading discussion can focus on a critical argument or controversy surrounding interpretation of a text. More simply, discussion or writing tasks can elicit students' personal views or previous readings on a topic or their expectations with respect to text content or point of view. In a civilization course, students familiar with American and French newspapers can be asked to compare articles from *The Washington Post* or *USA Today* on terrorism in Paris with articles from *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro*. Prior to the reading, they can articulate their expectations about what facts will be highlighted and what perspective or political stance, if any, the articles will reflect. Discussing these issues before rather than after reading provides focus, which in turn creates interest in the texts.

As preparation for reading authentic foreign language texts on a cultural topic, students can engage in peer reading and debate. In this activity, the instructor provides students with a topic for debate formulated in terms of a specific question. Each student writes a short position statement on the topic, making an argument that may or may not represent their view. In groups, students read through and discuss all statements, culling what they believe to be the best arguments for and against each side of the debate. The groups then compare their results. Again, prior discussion of the arguments provides a focal point for reading.

Writing is a particularly effective form of pre-reading activity that prompts readers to reflect on what they are about to read. Writing activities foster the development of a sense of authorship, which in turn helps make students more critical readers. An effective way to promote active response to text is through assignment of reading journals. In these, students write entries prior to each reading assignment. In addition to writing their reactions to text passages already read, they are encouraged to write prospectively, anticipating story line or character development and formulating questions about what they are about to read. Journal entries are handed in to the instructor or exchanged with other students and form the basis for discussion or for other, more developed writing tasks.

Uses of Text Across the Curriculum

Ideally, it is the intended use of texts by learners that should drive reading instruction across the curriculum. In high schools and colleges, learners' needs may range from fulfilling a language requirement to language use in travel or study abroad or general interest in language and culture. Because of this wide range, it is often difficult to base instruction on a well-defined set of learners' future needs or target tasks; however, it is possible to place increased emphasis on learners' potential uses of text. Such a focus might prompt reevaluation of a variety of foreign language courses and programs, ranging from foreign language across the curriculum to reading requirements for M.A. and Ph.D. candidates in the humanities.

At all levels of foreign language instruction, providing students a reason to pick up a text also gives them a way to read it. In elementary and intermediate classes, whole real-world tasks that offer other kinds of communicative purpose convey to students the value of reading for message. In advanced-level courses, the principle of reading with a purpose means rethinking the conventional "read and discuss" approach to literary and cultural texts. It means that some of the classroom discussion that has traditionally taken place after reading would be better placed before, so students have *something to read for*. Reading with a perspective or reading to decide for or against a particular interpretation, not only creates interest in the text but also provides students with something interesting to say after reading. At all levels of foreign language coursework, purposeful reading can enhance interest and recall on the part of students. Just as important, the concept of purpose provides a useful organizing principle for the coordination of reading instruction across the curriculum.

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